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ABSTRACT

Many clients experience chronic anxiety, procrastination, indecisiveness, and a lack of commitment in their lives. In a number of these cases, the dynamic underlying the distress of these individuals is that of perfectionism, an exceedingly strong internal demand to perform constantly without flaw. Many social and familial factors set the stage for perfectionism, and it manifests itself in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dynamics. Many forms of religious training, traditional Western education, and the media all uphold perfectionistic thinking. The obsession with being perfect infiltrates families and is passed on from generation to generation. The perfectionist seems to lack a sense of self-compassion, compassion as an attitude which includes trust in oneself to learn and grow, a commitment to providing oneself a nurturing inner environment in which to grow, and loyalty to oneself while growing. Therapy with a perfectionistic client is often difficult. Guidelines which may be helpful include: (1) placing the dynamic of perfectionism within the environmental context; (2) helping clients to experience the degree to which perfectionistic standards infiltrate their lives; (3) examining the full cycle of critical self-statements, emotional reactions, and compulsive behaviors; and (4) addressing the underlying fear of self-compassion. (Author/NRB)

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THE DYNAMICS OF PERFECTIONISM: FEAR OF SELF-COMPASSION

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ABSTRACT

Many clients experience chronic anxiety, procrastination, indecisiveness, and a lack of commitment in their lives. In a good number of cases, the dynamic underlying the distress of these individuals is that of perfectionism, an exceedingly strong internal demand to perform constantly without flaw. Many social and familial factors set the stage for perfectionism, and it manifests in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dynamics. This paper explores one main factor which holds perfectionism in place, fear of self-compassion, which must be addressed with clients before the grip of perfectionism can be loosened. Recommendations will be given for counselors and therapists working with perfectionistic clients.

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Introduction

Many persons express concerns about the demands of work and relationships, and it is not uncommon for clients in psychotherapy to feel anxious or depressed about their ability to do well in their lives. For some clients, however, "doing well" has become synonymous with "being perfect" and these persons are usually driven by an exceedingly strong internal demand to perform constantly, without flaw. No matter what types of tasks are completed or achievements gained, the "perfectionists" still suffer from a sense of having fallen short of their ideal--whether it be writing a paper, delivering a lecture, cooking a meal, or completing an exercise routine. There is no way to win.

"Perfectionism" is not a term that appears with much frequency in the professional literature. It is rarely found in the index on texts of counseling and psychotherapy theory and practice. Usually, perfectionism is addressed peripherally, as one component in other behavioral or emotional problems, including overachievement (Hill, 1982; Post, 1982), eating disorders (Cauwels, 1983), fear of failure (Birney, 1969), and procrastination (Burka & Yuen, 1983). Most often, a cognitive-behavioral approach is taken by therapists who discuss their work with clients who have perfectionistic features (Burns, 1980; Rubin, 1975).

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This paper will discuss the social and familial factors which set the stage for perfectionism in individuals. The interaction of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors holding the perfectionistic cycle in place will be addressed, with particular emphasis placed on the dynamic of fear of self-compassion. Recommendations will be made to therapists who work with perfectionistic clients.

Components of Perfectionism

The dynamic of perfectionism includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral counterparts. Cognitively, the individual is beset by an internal voice that is critical of everything; self-talk is highly judgmental, fault-finding, and self-derogating. Emotionally, the person feels angry at him or herself, overwhelmed in the face of constant pressure to improve, and hopeless to do anything about it. Behaviorally, he or she vacillates between performing compulsively and procrastinating; in either case, results are often not gained, or if they are, they are discounted by the inner judgmental voice. Perfectionists may be seen by others as hard workers; most often, however, they see themselves as being directionless, and their lives as being empty.

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Roots of Perfectionism

One may look in several directions to explore the roots of perfectionism. In many forms of religious training, perfection has been held out as an ideal to which one should aspire. The central stream of Christian thinking, for example, focuses on progress toward perfection, sought through the exercise of a strong will and the placing of oneself in God's hands. ("Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect").

Traditional Western education strongly upholds perfectionistic thinking. In most schools, children compete for grades which symbolize how close to perfect their behavior and work has been, with a 4.0 being the perfect score. (Not surprisingly, 4.0's are becoming outdated, and in many secondary schools and colleges it is now possible to receive an A+, a 4.5. As more and more students have been able to achieve "perfection," the criteria have been raised. Interestingly, this is a phenomenon repeated by perfectionistic individuals in relationship to their own personal standards--the stakes are always raised just out of reach.) It is not uncommon for children in elementary school to come home crying because they missed one or two problems on a test and did not receive 100%. College counselors see dozens of students each year who are distraught with their 3.75 G.P.A.'s and are unable to

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imagine a life in which they are not admitted to their first-choice graduate school.

The media, of course, support visions of the perfect life, and advertising, especially, flaunts scenes of thin, rich and happy models, suggesting that this is not far from reach. Our upwardly mobile society has long held the myth that "anyone can be president", implying that if you do not reach the top, it is due to your own shortcomings and lack of effort. Again and again, upward striving is the norm and contentment with anything less is met with suspicion and distain.

The obsession with being perfect infiltrates families and is passed on from one generation to the next. A child in a perfectionistic home soon learns that worth is defined by performance. Simply "being" is not good enough. Standards for what is "good" and "bad" are set from the outside, not from within, and have clear demarcations: a letter grade of "A" is acceptable, a high "B" is failure. There is nothing in between. Spontaneous and creative expression becomes risky and is muffled out of fear of disapproval.

As the child grows up, perfectionism becomes so insidious that it feels normal. Everything is distorted by impossible self-demands and exorbitant expectations, and fueled by three main illusions:

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1. Being perfect is actually possible.
2. Perfection may be reached through hard work.
3. Being perfect will bring love and a great sense of well being.

The Internal Cycle

An enormous amount of energy is generated as the perfectionistic person plays both the roles of performer and critic. Beneath this flurry of activity, however, is harbored the fear that in reality, he or she is completely inadequate and lacks the ability ever to do or be anything of importance. To keep these threatening feelings out of awareness and to stave off the horrible possibility of being vastly imperfect, the individual persists in the self-torture of obsessional demands, compulsive work, and relentless self criticism. The desperate, endless striving continues--because the person believes if he or she stops, and simply is, who he or she is will be pitifully empty, inadequate, and alone.

In examining the process of perfectionistic clients, it appears that a part of them still reacts as the young child who learned that love only came through good performance, defined and evaluated by others. Two main feelings live on through this child-part: one feeling is an extreme sense of rage at not being seen and at having to perform to others' demands. (It is often this part that screams, "I won't do

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it! I won't do anything!" through the act of procrastination.)

The other feeling in the child-part is the terror of being unable to perform--of being nothing, empty or dead. To protect this terrorized child, an inner critic develops, subjugating him or her to endless judgments and demands, and distracting him/her from the fear, thus locking the person in the self defeating cycle of perfectionistic striving and extreme disappointment. As harsh as this cycle is, it is familiar and has a reassuring value. As long as the striving for perfection is in place, the illusion that one just might get there remains. This results is a closed feedback loop: the dynamic is replayed solidly, and any amount of "reasoning" with perfectionists that their standards are excessive is apt to be met with argument and denial. It is nearly impossible for them to believe they could lower their expectations and still survive.

Fear of Self-Compassion

One component in this system is especially striking: the perfectionist seems to lack a sense of self-compassion--not compassion as a feeling of self-pity or being a victim, but compassion as an attitude which includes trust in oneself to learn and grow, a commitment to providing oneself a nurturing inner environment in which to grow, and loyalty to oneself while growing. The

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perfectionist staunchly refuses to allow for the "mistakes" made while learning and sees him or herself always as product, not process. The thought of being self-compassionate is not merely dismissed as being irrelevant--it is vehemently opposed.

Several people who defined themselves as perfectionists were asked if they ever felt compassionate with themselves, and their negative responses were made with great clarity and force:

"If I were compassionate with myself, I'm afraid I'd be stuck with how I am. I'd never improve or be anything. I don't believe that I can accept myself and also be able to change. (When asked if being critical helped her change, this person laughed and said, "not at all--but at least I think it will help.")

"If I were compassionate to myself I might live, and living is scary. It's beyond my safe confines. I might fail and I might succeed. If I beat myself up, I don't have to venture out."

"If I were compassionate with myself, I'd have to give up my pride. I'd be feeling sorry for myself, and I hate pity of any kind. Compassion should go to those who can't help what befalls them. My failures as a person are because I'm basically lazy and this behavior should not be reinforced with compassion. I don't deserve being treated that well."

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"Being compassionate with myself implies I have failed, otherwise I wouldn't need the compassion. The very act of self compassion is evidence that I haven't measured up."

"I would have to confront my separateness from others, who see me without compassion. I might have to challenge their ability to see me, and trust my own assessment to stand on my own against and away from others. This feels like a betrayal. I'm not sure if I have the strength to do it."

Instead of having a sense of themselves as a being in process, perfectionistic individuals are invested in being a finished product <u>now</u>, and strongly oppose any inner attitude that might undermine their quest for perfection. They fear being understanding, loving, loyal and compassionate to themselves, for in their minds this would be a dangerous attitude indeed--fostering sloth and insuring failure. At an even deeper level lies their conviction that, being imperfect, they do not deserve their own compassion. Thus, they deprive themselves of the very inner environment that could enable them to pull out of this self defeating cycle.

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Therapeutic Recommendations

Loosening the grip of perfectionism is not an easy task. Therapy with a perfectionistic client is often quite difficult, for any focus on change either elevates resistance or evokes the client's desire to change perfectly (thus, to be 'perfectly' less perfect). A few guidelines may be helpful:

1. It is important to place the dynamic of perfectionism within the environmental context, exploring historical, social, cultural and familial impacts upon the individual.

2. Clients must be helped to experience the degree to which these exceedingly high standards infiltrate all aspects of their lives: work, physical activity, appearance, relationships.

3. The full cycle of critical self-statements, emotional reactions, and compulsive behaviors should be examined, with the function and interplay of all three "inner voices" (critic, frightened child, and angry child) acknowledged and explored.

4. Most importantly, the underlying fear of self-compassion must be fully addressed if the individual is to begin to create an internal environment in which authentic growth and transformation can take place.

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